

REMARKS TO THE SUBCOMMITTEE OF BORDER AND MARITIME SECURITY OF THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

May 1, 2012

Good afternoon, distinguished members of the Sub-Committee of Border and Maritime Security and guests. On behalf of the 750 members of the Laredo Chamber of Commerce I'd like to welcome you to our fair city on the U.S.-Mexico border. I want to thank you for taking the initiative to visit border crossings and see firsthand the movement of people and the processing of goods that takes place on a daily basis in these various locations; but, more importantly, I commend you for taking the time to meet with members of the private sector to discuss non governmental issues of concern.

I know that time is limited so I'll be careful to keep my remarks short.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I hope that during your visit you have the opportunity to visit the port; to tour the bridge; and to see the movement of traffic. Aside from being the U.S.' most important crossing point for the movement of cargo, Laredo, being at the south end (or start) of I-35, also happens to be a major crossing point for tourism and business-related activity. The economy of our community, as all border communities, is heavily dependent on business and trade with our neighbors to the south.

As representative of the business community in general, my remarks will address two particular industries – 1) that of international trade and transportation and 2) that of regular traffic which impacts our tourism and retail industries.

Regarding the first, I will keep my remarks to a minimum since I am sure there will be other testimony by experts that will address issues specific to that industry. Suffice it to say that two of our international bridges – the World Trade Bridge and the Colombia Bridge – cross over 10,000 trucks daily – and the rail bridge crosses over 1,400 rail cars also on a daily basis. The manufactured and agricultural product that crosses our bridges is not destined for this community – rather, northbound, it is distributed to states along the northeast, the Midwest, and I dare say, even the west coast; southbound, it is likewise destined for Mexico City, Monterrey, Guadalajara, and a number of other Mexican markets. Product aimed for manufacturing purposes travels on a “just-in-time” travel schedule. That means that production depends heavily on timely deliveries. Delays along the way, for whatever purpose, may end up costing companies thousands or millions of dollars that affect all of us. It is imperative that the flow of goods across our border move constantly and efficiently.

Regarding the second industry – that of retail and tourism – Let me say that notwithstanding the reports of an increase in crime on the Mexican side of the border, consumers from throughout Mexico visit our city throughout the year and nurture our retail industry. In addition, millions of visitors pass through our city on their way to other points within the United States. The Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, El Paso Branch, reports that as much as 40% of local retail sales can be

attributed to Mexican nationals. The same, perhaps not at the same level, but quite similar can be said of each of the other crossing points along the U.S-Mexico border.

Let me also add that Laredo's geographic location also makes it a key crossing point for tourists visiting other parts of the state. One or two-hour waits in 100-degree weather, however, will tend to discourage visitors from planning trips, or at the very minimum, reduce the number of trips they make during the year. What affects us on the border, inevitably has an impact on other communities in other parts of the state, as evidenced by the number of I-94's generated on this border. Retail centers in San Antonio, as well as outlet malls in San Marcos, TX, will readily corroborate the impact that sales to Mexican nationals have on their figures. Both these destinations attribute a substantial amount of retail sales to Mexican consumers.

I mention all this to give you an idea as to the significance of the international bridges to our business community.

Now, let me add that our community has been a strong supporter of border security. Even faced by increased vehicle searches following 9/11, added security programs, such as US-VISIT, Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI), which tend to impact on the number of crossings and result in longer lines and extended wait time at the bridges, you'll find that support in our community for safe borders has not wavered.

Yet, it is important, that we maintain a careful balance between security and commerce. We cannot afford to hurt our economy in our haste to seal our borders.

Certainly, there is an illicit movement of drugs and undocumented aliens across our borders. We are all aware of that. But, by far, the larger majority of people moving across our southern borders do so in a legal manner and for lawful business and leisure activity. They, literally, come to spend money in the U.S. We must keep that in mind as they make their way into our country. We must offer visitors from Mexico entering the U.S. by land the same treatment that we offer air and sea travelers. Specifically, I ask you to consider:

- 1) Support for proper resources to properly implement security programs – i.e.
 - Provide federal agencies with sufficient personnel to do a proper job
 - Provide the required infrastructure to ensure that traffic continues to flow (e.g., proper and humane facilities for bus passengers entering the country, and for the issuance of I-94 permits)
- 2) Sensitivity and proper training to ensure that visitors entering our country are made to feel like visitors and, not necessarily, suspects. As far as the latest report that I've seen from our federal agencies, not a single individual involved in any form of terrorism has been detained along the southern border. Yes, we must be vigilant, but we must also continue to be courteous.

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is our hope that you will take back this message with you to Washington. Particularly given the wave of isolationism seeping through the nation and calls for militarization of the border, it is important that we keep in mind that sealing the border is a shortsighted way of looking for solutions. Bottlenecks, longer waits, disdain for visitors... these all affect our community. But, in the long run, they bring about dire consequences to the

economy of the state and the country as a whole – we're only the crossing point after all. Ladies and Gentlemen, this community is 94% Hispanic. We value our heritage. We treasure our business ties with our neighbors to the south – but, I assure you, we are Americans first. We don't ask that we do away with security, simply that we do so in a civil and efficient manner.

Thank you.